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THE UTE BEAR DANCE

VERNER Z. REED

In March, 1893, I attended and participated in the annual Bear dance of the Ute Indians, held on this occasion by the Southern Ute tribe on their reservation in Colorado. Owing to an intimate personal friendship with the war chief and several other prominent members of the tribe, I was enabled, by dint of much patience and perseverance, to meet with some success in making a study of the dance. I do not believe that any white person has studied it before, and while it is quite probable that all the mysteries of the dance were not explained to me, I believe that the knowledge gained will be of interest to students of Indian life. So far as I could learn, there is no tradition antedating the dance itself on which the ceremonies are founded, and I believe the Bear dance to be one of the oldest of all the Ute ceremonies. Traditions are mingled with it, are the life of it, but the Indians believe the dance to be as old as the traditions themselves.

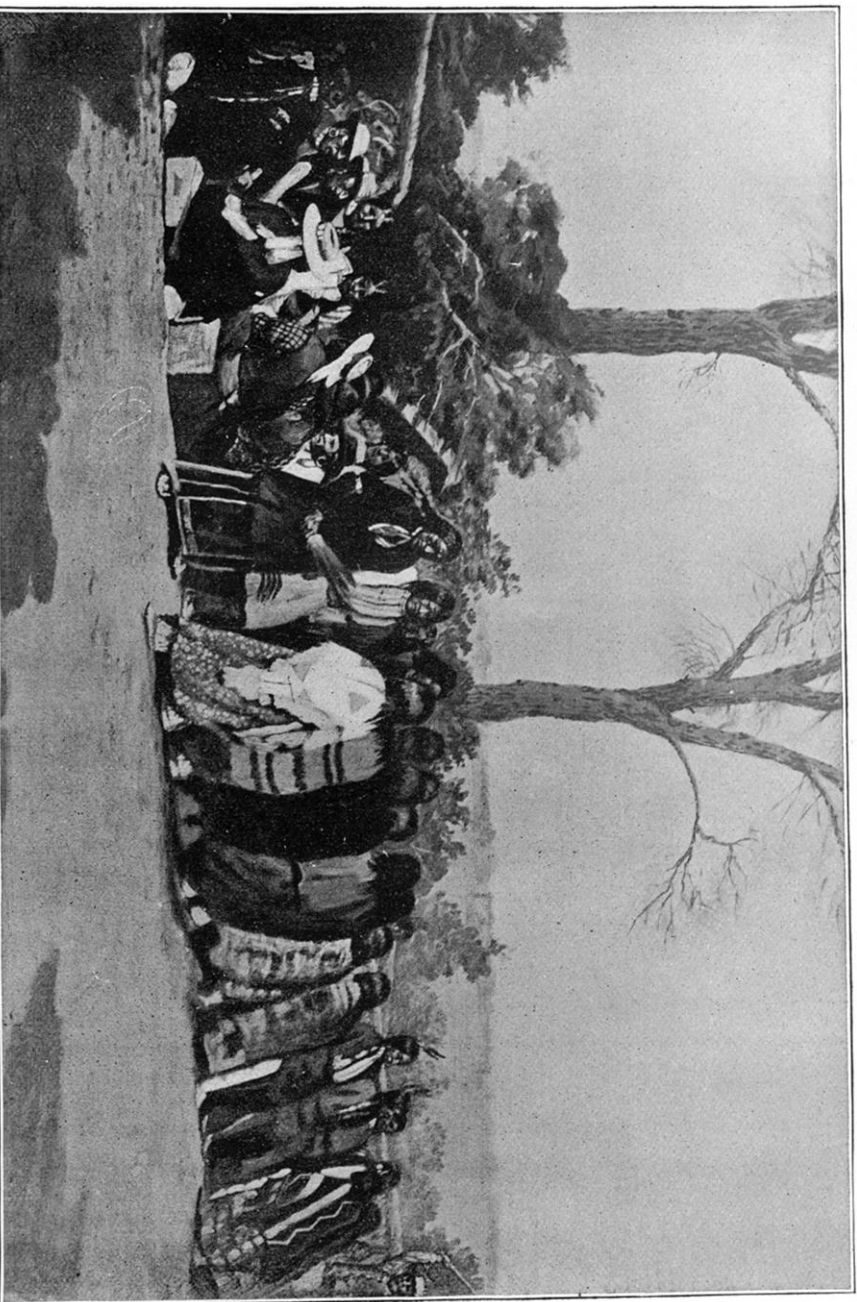
In all the picturesque West there is probably nothing more picturesque than the sacred Bear dance of the Ute. The one I attended was held in the valley of the Rio de los Pinos, a beautiful little tributary valley of the great San Juan, with the mighty panorama of the towering La Plata mountains always in view. Groups of tents were scattered over a distance of a mile or more. Far away over the mesas could be seen the caravans, groups and individual Indians, coming to the camp to participate in the dance. An inclosure of evergreen boughs was erected near some tall cottonwood trees, and everywhere were Indians dressed in their best and on their best behavior, gathered together from the ends of the reservation for the purpose of assisting in the ceremonies.

Although their reservations are being encroached on by the settlements of the whites, the Ute Indians have scarcely been touched by civilizing influences, and they adhere to the traditions and beliefs of their fathers in the days before they were hemmed in by Anglo-Saxon boundary lines of progress. To them Nature is the all-providing mother, and their ceremonies are founded on the evidences of nature as they see them. A

vivid imagination has often crowned or distorted nature, but through all their rites there runs an adoration of natural phenomena. They have seen the eagle in his eyries preying on and mastering all other birds, and they regard the eagle as being king and chief of the feathered kind. They have seen the mountain lion assert his supremacy over all other animals, and to them he is king of beasts. They have, in their way, traced the laws of nature in either direction to birth or death, and there they leave fact and enter the realm of superstition, as many wiser nations have done.

The Utes believe that their primal ancestors were bears; after these came a race of Indians, who, on dying, were changed to bears, and as bears they roamed in the forests and mountains until they died, when they went to the future land and lived with the shades, preserving the forms of bears, but having human wisdom and participating with the Indians in the pleasures of immortality. It is believed that this transmigration ceased long ago, but the bears of the present are believed to be descendants of the Ute bears of old, and are therefore related to the Indians. Bear worship, in one form or another, tinges many of their ceremonies. They regard the bear as the wisest of animals and the bravest of all except the mountain lion. They believe that bears possess wonderful magic power; that they can convey intelligence over long distances by means of *po-o-kan-te*, or magic. They believe that the bears are fully cognizant of the relationship existing between themselves and the Utes, and their ceremony of the Bear dance, being a form of animal worship, assists in strengthening this friendship. As the Utes consider that they are a higher order of beings than the bears, one of the purposes of the dance is to assist the bears to recover from hibernation, to find food, to choose mates, and to cast the film of blindness from their eyes. Some of the other motives of the ceremonies are to charm the dancers from danger of death from bears, to enable the Indians to send messages to their dead friends who dwell in the land of immortality, and one or two minor ceremonies are performed usually for the purpose of healing certain forms of sickness.

The Bear dance is always held in the month of March, that being the time when the bears recover from hibernation. In former times the dance was more exactly observed than it



Drawn by Charles Gritz

THE UTE BEAR DANCE

Photo by Dinwiddie

now is, and a dance was often held annually by each one of the Ute tribes. Of late years, however, a dance given by any one of the main tribes is deemed sufficient.

The dance is always given under the direction of some one person, usually a medicine man or chief, although he may have any number of semiofficial assistants. Sometimes two or three months are consumed in making the necessary preparations. After the annual winter hunt is over, when the time grows dull and the people listless from inaction, a man goes to the proper functionary and asks him to appoint the time for a Bear dance. The language of the Utes is simple, and like most simple languages, possesses an element of poesy. The following, almost verbatim, is the language used by a Southern Ute in requesting a chief to arrange for a dance :

“Chief, it has been long since our people have all been in one place, and it would be good for us all to be together again. The times have been good with us; our children have been stricken with no diseases; we have had no wars in which our men have been killed; we had much good fortune in our hunts, and we have plenty of food for a feast. The bears are our friends; the time has come for them to be awakened from the long sleep of winter. We have good friends above; it would be well to send messages to them to let them know that we of the earth still love them and remember them. Let us, then, give a Bear dance.”

If the chief agrees, messages are sent to the makers of songs, the gossip of the tribe for the last year is reviewed, and the more amusing and choicest portions are incorporated into songs set to simple tunes and practiced. Songs of worship and incantations to the bears and shades of the dead are also composed, but the songs of lighter character prevail. The squaws hew *moraches* or “singing-sticks” out of wood to be used during the dance ceremonies. These sticks are shaped like the jaw of an animal, and teeth-like protuberances are left over which to grate bones or sticks of wood.

One of the first duties performed is to select the site for the dance. The one I attended was held on a slight elevation. Men are then detailed to go to the forests and bring in timbers and pine boughs with which to make the inclosure in which the dance is held. This inclosure is named *a-vik-wok-et*, or “cave of sticks.” It is from 100 to 150 feet in diameter, is circular, and

is meant to represent a bear cave. It has one opening, always to the south or southeast, facing the sun, as the bears in choosing their winter quarters are said to select caves into the mouth of which the sun shines a part of the day. The walls of the inclosure are about seven feet high; there is no roof, and no floor save the ground. On one side a location is selected for the stand of the musicians and a hole somewhat of the shape of a water-jar is dug in the soil. First a circular hole is made and then the Indians reach under and scoop out the earth with their hands, in semblance of an underground cave. Over the hole a box or drum with an open bottom is placed, the hole augmenting the sound that is made when the *moraches* are grated. The *moraches* are placed with one end on the lap of the player and the other end against the box. Up and down them bones or pieces of timber are rubbed, making a noise that at a short distance sounds like the beating of a pair of muffled cymbals.

When the preparations for the dance are well under way the chief sends out a courier to announce the ceremony to the tribe. The tribes are divided into small bands of from five to ten families each. The courier rides to the encampment of one of these bands, delivers his message, eats, smokes, and returns to his own encampment, and the head man of the band selects one of his men to carry the announcement to the next band, and so on until all have been given notice.

The Indians believe that the immortal bears and Indians who dwell in the Land Beyond are cognizant of the preparations that are being made for a dance, and that they also prepare for a spirit Bear dance. It is believed, too, that the spirit bears send some of their number to earth to whisper to the sleeping bears and tell them that they are soon to be freed from the long sleep of winter.

The ground within the *a-vik-wok-et* is sacred during the days of the dance and no dogs or horses are allowed on it. To keep animals out, to preserve order, and to enliven the spirit of the dancers, there are two managers of the dance, called *ma-choot-a-po-get-ah*. All who come within the inclosure while dancing is going on must dance, if requested and any woman has a right to choose any man as a partner.

There are always twenty or more musicians who have been specially drilled for these ceremonies, as well as other men who

join in when old or familiar songs are sung. The singers are always men; they are the first to arrive at the dance inclosure on the day of beginning, and from eight to fourteen of them sing and rub their notched timbers constantly during the dancing.

When the music begins, the noise sounds in the little cave-like hole under the drum, and a song of incantation is sung that is believed to transport this noise to the caves of the bears in the mountains and to transform it to thunder. It is believed that this thunder arouses the bears slightly, but that they are sluggish from the long hibernation and do not become fully awake at first. On this account the dancing lasts but an hour or two the first day.

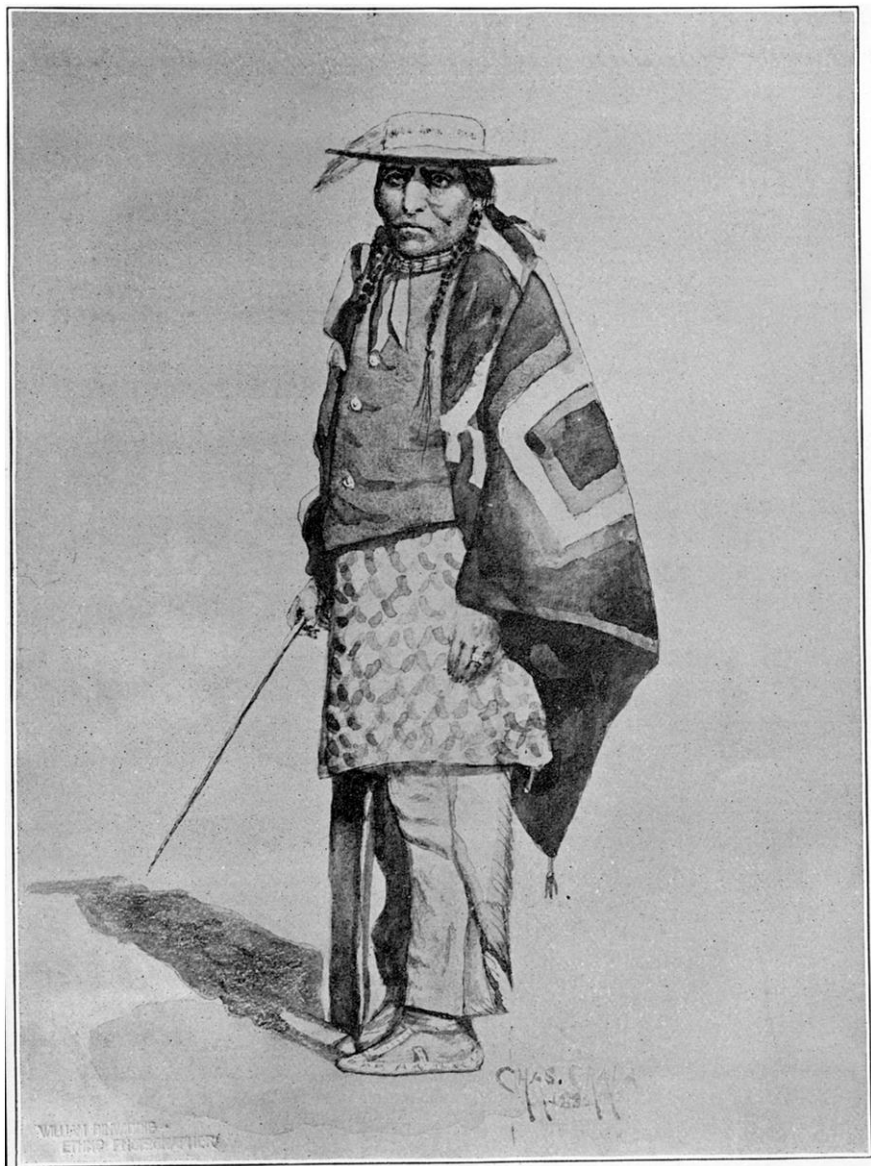
The female bear chooses her mate, and in the dance the women choose their partners. When a woman desires to dance with a man, she approaches him and plucks his blanket, and then sedately takes her position in line with the other women and awaits his coming. The women form in one line, the men in another, the two lines facing each other. At first the participants in each line hold hands, but as the days pass the enthusiasm increases and each couple dances independently. When the proper bar in the music has been struck, the women take three forward, springing steps toward the men; they then reverse and take three backward steps, and as they go backward the men go forward in the same fashion, motioning with their arms in imitation of the motions made by the forepaws of bears. When the men have gone three steps forward, they reverse and go backward and the women go forward again. This is the only figure in the dance, but it may be varied in numerous ways by dancers who strive to show their skill. Often a couple will dance with their arms about each other, imitating the "hugging" of bears, but there are always the monotonous three steps.

While the dance is in progress no gambling, and but little work, is permitted. All except the smallest children dance; some, no doubt, chiefly for the social pleasure, of which there is little enough in their narrow lives, others to perfect themselves in magic, to send messages to their departed friends, and to charm their lives against danger from bears. It is believed that the bears are cognizant of who participate in the dance and will harm no one of the dancers for a year afterward.

It is an evil omen for a dancer to fall, but this "bad medi-



A MANAGER OF THE BEAR DANCE



A MANAGER OF THE BEAR DANCE

following day. No food is eaten during the eighteen hours of this closing ceremony, but at noon of the fourth day a great feast is spread, and the tired dancers have full privilege to eat all they wish. The spirit of this feast is believed to be wafted away, part to the beyond, where it provides a feast for the shades who have been dancing, and part to the forests, where it is believed to be eaten by the bears.

Several times during the progress of the dance messages are sent to the Land Beyond. One of the managers waves his staff for silence, and then a chief arises and announces the rite. The men stand in silence on one side of the inclosure, the women sit mutely on the other. Then a bunch of corn-husks for cigarettes, together with a bottle of tobacco, are handed to the leader of the musicians. He takes the husks and tobacco in his hand, reverently bows his head and repeats an incantation, and then rolls a cigarette, passing the husks and tobacco to another singer, who does the same. When each of the singers has rolled a cigarette, all heads are bowed again, there is a long moment of absolute silence, and then the words of an incantation are repeated in chorus by all the singers. It is believed that the words of the incantation are heard in the sky, and that the shades there know that messages are to be sent to them from some of their mortal brothers. After this incantation the cigarettes are lighted and a few puffs blown toward the sky, it being believed that the smoke ascends and provides a smoke of friendship with the shades. Then the particular messages are spoken, the speaker bowing his head as he talks, and all the others maintaining the most rigid silence and not moving in their places. The Indians believe that any one can, with the aid of the incantations and the sacred smoke, send messages to the sky, but that answers can be heard only by medicine men.

Two or three times during the continuance of the dance, but never until after the first day has passed, a handsomely beaded medicine pipe, filled with dried kinikinik leaves, is brought into the inclosure, lighted, and passed from one man to another, each taking two or three puffs, rubbing his fingers over the stem of the pipe, as though it were a flute, and then handing it to the man next to him. This ceremony is to show affection for the shades by providing them with a similar smoke, and is an important medical ceremony as well, for it is believed that it pro-

fects the smokers from pneumonia and consumption. The women take no active part in either of the smoking ceremonies, but are rapt observers.

When the feast of the fourth day is concluded, all the ceremonies of the dance are over, and it is believed that the bears have fully regained the use of all their faculties, have found mates, have been provided with food, and that they will gratefully remember their Indian relatives and repay them by assisting them in the practice of magic.

The Bear dance is more of a social affair than any of the other Ute ceremonies except the Tea dance. While the Bear dance is in progress much courting is shyly done among the young people, and after the conclusion of the dance ceremonies there is a period of feasting and merrymaking. Several of the younger couples may be married according to the very simple Ute ceremony; families will visit with friends whom they may not have seen for a year; a few horse races and foot races will be arranged, and in sunny spots men and women will congregate, blankets will be spread on the ground, and belongings will be hazarded in the Mexican game of monte or in the native game of *kan-yu-te*. Some traffic may be done in horses, blankets, skins, and beadwork, and a council may be held by the chiefs and older men; but within a day or two the big assembly will begin to disband; in pairs and groups the Indians will depart; within a few days the big camp will be deserted, the people will be scattered to the four quarters of their reservation, and in the minds of men who are hunting and women who are tanning hides or cooking food will linger pleasant memories of the jollity, the music, the songs, the love-making, the good fellowship, the worship, and the sacred duties pleasantly performed that helped to make up the great sacred Dance of the Bears.